main pathways, some of which were meant for walks (ambulationes), while other broader paths were for drives in litters (gestationes). Sometimes the pathways were shaded by pergolas sustained by marble columns or caryatids. They were bounded by flowerbeds with herbs and flowers and were interspersed with tiny trees pruned into all sorts of shapes. Spaced between the trees were box hedges, also fashioned in various shapes. The hedges were low enough to allow a view of the landscape and statuary, benches, and vases set here and there among the pathways. Thus, the duties of the architectural gardener (topiarius) which entailed a host of activities not specifically related to gardens, actually involved both architecture and sculpture. Frequently, these garden architects revealed great skill in creating obelisks, pyramids, statues, and animals out of plants. Their garden landscapes were so highly appreciated that they would often be reproduced in the murals frescoed in the villas along with country scenes of animals, flowers, and trees.

By the same token, the villa itself would later constitute one of the basic elements of Roman landscape painting, often closely tied in with motifs of the sea animal world, by this time widely used in all Roman decorative art.

Hand in hand with their passion for the artistic layout of plants in gardens, the Romans also delighted in making water an integral part of the vegetable and architectural elements. Besides natural waterways, the villas contained pools stocked with fish, tiny canals, and artificial waterfalls with reflecting pools.

In the early stages, the fountains were in the form of cascades flowing down the walls of natural grottos. Later, they were set into artificial grottos or nymphaeums replete with ceilings, niches, and apses decorated with seashells, mother-of-pearl, and statuary. The fountains themselves were made up either of statues, singly or in groups, portraying figures from the sea or Dionysian worlds, or else they were in the form of craters, at times with jets that emitted odd-sounding noises. In addition, water was used to power hydraulic organs, one of the best-known being the « Hydraulus » created by Ctesibius, the Alexandrian mathematician. Nero is known to have been exceedingly fond of such organs.

By the end of Rome's Imperial Age, the custom of constructing villas had fallen into disuse and throughout the High Middle Ages we find only castles. Within the castle walls there were gardens, though usually not exceedingly large, with lawns, flowerbeds, ornamental fountains, carved benches and fruit trees, as the miniatures in the codices prove. The cloisters of the monasteries and convents were wholly or partially landscaped and within their walls grew medical herbs, vegetables, fruit trees, and flowers. There were even fountains, sometimes set in little squares off to one side of the porticoed courtyards.

Around the year 1000, attempts at suburban and rural decentralizing cropped up here and there, on the heels of the cultural and social reawakening then in act. Nevertheless, it was not until the 13th century that we find a return to the custom of building country homes. This was brought about by various factors, such as the decline of feudalism, the renewal of agriculture on a more organized basis, and the transformation of the castles into more comfortable dwellings.

The gradual return to a less dangerous life style, which spanned the period from the end of the 13th to the beginning of the 14th centuries, led to a new flourishing of the villas, as we learn from the chronicles of the time. For instance, the chronicler Giovanni Villani reports that the noble and well-to-do citizens of Florence « ...spent four months a year in the country, together with their families. » In the words of an anonymous Ticenese author (1320), there were villas in Pavia, « ... for the recreation of the citizens. » Boccaccio in the Decameron gives an exemplary description of what a 14th century villa was like: a magnificent palace with numerous luxuriously furnished rooms built around a central courtyard and enhanced by a splendid setting. Boccaccio added the element that a stay in a villa also entailed intellectual delights.

Descriptions of gardens have also come down to us in the words of the chroniclers and writers of the times. Most commonly cited are the preface to the third day in the Decameron and the first four chapters of the eighth book of « Agriculture » by Pietro de' Crescenzi. Naturally, these gardens were composed of only elementary geometric patterns, and had no particularly outstanding artistic motifs.

From the 14th century stirrings to the dawn of the 15th century, we can define the basis of the Renaissance villa which was then evolving into regional variants. All the variants however had a common bond in the Humanistic spirit which from the Medici court was spreading throughout Italy, indeed throughout the whole of Europe. People in the regions of Liguria, Lombardy, and Venice, favored by political and economic incentives, either began to adapt pre-existing buildings into dwellings in keeping with the new Renaissance ideals or else enthusiastically threw themselves into the job of creating new villas from scratch. Likewise, the courts of Rome and Naples, also permeated with Humanism and anxious to partake of the new cultural atmosphere, undertook a whole series of architectural initiatives, the villa being one of the most important of these.

Structurally speaking, the early Quattrocento villas were rather vast buildings, at times two storied, with a single tower or a pair of towers flanking the central section. On the ground floor was a loggia which led up to the entrance to the main hall.

Michelozzo is credited with being the first architect to have turned castles and fortresses into country homes, intentionally refining the stolid compactness of medieval architecture. Yet at times it